

Pets & People: responsible animal assistance therapy

Unique initiatives in the Dutch healthcare market

Stichting ZorgDier Nederland is a knowledge and volunteer organisation which aims to improve people's quality of life through personal visits, accompanied by qualified pets, to people in need of care.

Proven effects

In the past four years, a Dutch university has conducted four studies into the effects of pet care team visits and the wellness results of this on the various target groups.

One of the studies showed that visits from volunteers accompanied by a dog or cat clearly produced better results than visits from volunteers who did not bring a pet with them. The visits from the pet care teams generated more fun, more physical activities and pleasant, fun conversations.

The same applied to elderly people suffering from dementia in two daytime nursing homes. During the visits from the pet care teams, there was more attentiveness, more activity, more fun and more topics of conversation than that seen during the visits from a volunteer who simply read a story about pets to the residents.

The studies conducted among children with psychiatric problems also showed that the children relaxed, that they talked a great deal about and to the dog and that they played with the dog. It was particularly interesting to see that there was no aggression and very little fear shown by these children.

In short, research shows that the pet care team has a concrete positive effect on clients.

According to Jan van Summeren, the director of ZorgDier, using a pet in a responsible manner is in no way harmful to the pet. What's more, the pet often experiences the visit to a client as a welcome change, and a mental and sometimes physical challenge. This prevents boredom in the pet and problem behaviour that can often result from this.

Approach based on principles of industrial marketing

ZorgDier is based on principles of industrial marketing and after thorough customer research, arrived at the realisation that care institutions need an integral programme which will allow them to grow independently. ZorgDier offers a programme that fully meets the needs and corresponds to the protocols in place in the Dutch care sector. The care client is at the heart of this programme, and the pet is the means. Since the care institution is the owner of the project, this type of project is taken much more seriously.

The sustainability of a pet care programme is guaranteed through workshops, classes for advanced students, quality inspections and re-evaluations.

Recruitment, training and efforts of volunteers

Thanks to focused media campaigns, suitable volunteers and their pets are recruited. After the selection phase, the five-day training programme starts, consisting of a number of modules, all of which are dedicated to the client target group for which the volunteers will be deployed. The training is held at the care location where the volunteers will later work with the clients.

In order to assess whether the volunteer possesses sufficient skills for the work to be done in the future, the clients' behaviour will be imitated through role play exercises during an evaluation. The instructors will evaluate whether the volunteer has acquired enough insight. During the project, the care staff will be taught the best way to employ pet care teams, as a function of the clients' care needs. This results in a proper match between pet care team and client.

Once the new pet care teams start their work, they will be briefly supervised by an instruction team.



Through personal supervision over the course of several months, the volunteers will be put in a position to make a contribution to the client's welfare, also within the context of more complex situations.

International collaboration

Over the last several years, the realisation is growing that international relationships and collaboration are necessary in order to learn from one another and to use the knowledge acquired regarding the effective therapeutic use of pets in order to increase professionalism. Organisations such as Assistance Dogs International and Assistance Dogs Europe endorse this goal.

There is a strong tendency among the various international umbrella organisations to continue to generate further integration. This collaboration benefits clear worldwide quality standards implemented by organisations which take themselves seriously.

ZorgDier has learned a great deal from Delta Society's approach, as well as from the scientific literature and insights which are available in the United States. By getting an international sponsor movement going, Jan van Summeren hopes to help Animal Assisted Therapy programmes worldwide in their further development and knowledge transfers regarding their own programmes.

International quality mark

Animal assisted therapy and activities promise to be a booming business in the coming period. However, there is a larger danger lurking in the unqualified use of pets with vulnerable people in society.

The international pursuit of collaboration and knowledge exchange and quality level must prevent these

Effects of pet care work

The most well-known effects of the interaction between people and pets are:

- Reduces heart rate and blood pressure and a calming effect.
- Stimulates mental capacities such as memory and communication skills.
- Stimulates (particularly among children) the development of compassion for others.
- Has a positive effect on the feeling of self-esteem: a pet does not judge or condemn.
- Helps people to improve concentration and not get distracted.
- Promotes people's openness with respect to their environment.
- Stimulates the communication between residents and caregivers in an institution.
- Ensures a pleasant way to pass the time (a break from one's own troubles).

In summary, pet care work can have physical, social, emotional and mental/cognitive effects on clients.

risks from arising. Governments and care institutions worldwide must be able to count on the highest level of quality. Through sponsoring, the affiliated organisations must be enabled to develop a supervisory and quality system. The international umbrella organisations play an important role in the development of a global quality mark.

Sponsors wanted!

ZorgDier is not financed using government resources. For this reason, funds, sponsors and donators are urgently needed in order to make further research and local projects possible.

In the years to come, ZorgDier would like to lay the foundation, together with a number of national and international socially involved businesses, for a more structural flow of income. This will facilitate the further development of the collaboration between pet care programmes both within and outside of Europe.

This means the creation of possibilities for a number of international manufacturers to promote their company as one that is socially responsible! ■

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